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Has it changed his tune?

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## *Conspiracy Again?*

Inevitably the legend of Robert Kennedy will swell, and inevitably the human being behind the legend will lose sharpness and become a blurred folk-hero. The process has already begun, and it will go further than is healthy, for Robert Kennedy—with all his vulnerabilities and strengths—was a striking human being. As Edward Kennedy put it in his eulogy of his brother, he does not need the legend to magnify him.

The legend may prove strongest among those who have the greatest need and hunger for a symbol—those in the Negro ghettos of the inner city. When Martin Luther King was killed, they felt bereft. King left behind him a vacuum of leadership. There was too little time for a black leader to move into the vacuum, so the Negroes reached for a white leader whose family and fame and fervor made him reachable, and whose staccato candor excited and warmed them. For a brief moment in the sun they relaxed in the glow of feeling between him and them—and then he was there no more.

When they put together—as they do—the killings of President Kennedy and Dr. King and Robert Kennedy they feel a gnawing, understandable despair. One can hear them saying: "Every time we find someone we feel we can trust, someone who shows he cares about us, he is cut down." It is a bleak feeling to have, but who can blame them for having it?

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**On one score there is a glimmer of satisfaction for them and** for all of us in the arrest in London of James Earl Ray. The prime suspect in the killing of Dr. King slipped through the FBI net, and the anger at the assassination was compounded by the feeling that no one would ever catch up with the killer and his accomplices. But in the end the FBI did catch up with Ray. What lies ahead—extradition, trial, perhaps some light on whom he was in touch with and where he got the money he spent—is a fascinating speculation.

In all three assassinations — of John Kennedy, of Martin Luther King, of Robert Kennedy—the anger and the legend-building come first, and then the talk of conspiracy. With many people it isn't just talk but certainty. In fact, so great is their need to draw a perfect circle around whatever troubles them, that some people are convinced of a single great conspiracy that envelops and explains all three assasinations.

Len Deighton, a gifted and somewhat raffish writer with a fertile imagination, wrote a suspense thriller a few years ago called "The Billion Dollar Brain," about a far out-right-wing Texas billionaire who had programmed his intricate intrigues into a computer. I find people who are willing to accept some theory like it as an explanation of what happened in the three assassinations, and if others happen—which is not impossible in an age of unbridled violence—they will enlarge the conspiracy circle to cover them.

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**In general I don't find a conspiracy theory of history fruitful,** but who could reasonably reject the idea of a conspiracy out of hand in all three cases. Yet I find each of them a separate case, to be taken on its merits. There may well have been more than one killer in the assassination of President Kennedy: the technical evidence suggests that there was, although we may never know what actually happened and who was involved. I am almost certain that Dr. King was the victim of a number of people

working together, and Ray's arrest offers some hope that we will find out who they were. But in the case of Robert Kennedy the chances of conspiracy seem slight to me, although they cannot yet be ruled out.

As for an overall grand conspiracy covering all three, involving the same shadowy group of people, I would bet wild odds against it. In fact the idea of a grand conspiracy is one of the key ideas of people who live in a hallucinatory world, the victims of paranoia.

For years there was talk of the fake master-plan of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, and some of the gullible believed it enough to feed their hate on it. More recently men like Sirhan Sirhan fed their hate by conjuring up a master-plan of a Jewish world conspiracy centering on Israel. None of this stuff washes. I suggest we drop it.

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**My own feeling about things is less sweeping, more imperfect.** I believe there are unjust people and forces in our society, but it is not an unjust society. I believe there are sick people in it, but it is not a sick society. I believe there are men in it who make conspiracies, but it is not a society about to be taken over by a grand conspiracy.